DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 265 429 CG 018 752

AUTHOR Berardo, Felix M.; And Others
TITLE On Gold Diggers: Status Gain or Loss in Age Heterogamous Marriages.
PUB DATE Nov 85
NOTE 24p.; Paper presented at the Annual Scientific Meeting of the Gerontological Society of America (38th, New Orleans, LA, November 22-26, 1985).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adults; *Age Differences; *Family Income; *Family Status; Interpersonal Relationship; *Marriage; Mate Selection; Motivation; *Spouses

ABSTRACT

The term "gold digger" is often applied to women and to the younger spouse in marriages with unconventional age diffferences. While this follows the view that women derive their class position from their husbands, the status gain or loss in age heterogamous studies has not been empirically tested. To examine status gain or loss in these marriages, 3,609 age homogamous and heterogamous couples were compared in terms of how the family's current status was related to measures of each of the spouse's inherited and achieved status and the contribution these make to explaining variance in income. Subjects were divided into four groups in which: (1) wives were 4 or more years older than their husbands; (2) husbands and wives were separated by no more than 3 years of age difference in either direction; (3) husbands were 4-10 years older than their wives; and (4) husbands were 11 or more years older than their wives. Data on subjects from the 1976 wave of the Panel of Income Dynamics was subjected to hierarchical multiple regression analysis which revealed that the status of the older spouse did not make a more important contribution toward explained income. For these subjects, in fact, the younger wife's status contributed more toward explained income than did the older husband's status. These findings suggest that the notion that age heterogamy in marriage represents a channel of upward mobility for young women married to older men needs systematic reexamination. (NRB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

PLEASE DO NOT QUOTE OR
REPRODUCE WITHOUT PERMISSION
OF THE AUTHORS.

ED265429

ON GOLDDIGGERS
STATUS GAIN OR LOSS
IN AGE HETEROGAMOUS MARRIAGES

By

Felix M. Berardo
Hernan Vera
Donna H. Berardo

Department of Sociology
University of Florida

CG018752

Paper Presented

38th Annual Scientific Meeting
The Gerontological Society of America
November 22-26, 1985
New Orleans, LA

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

✓ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Felix M. Berardo

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

ABSTRACT

Deviations from the age norms governing mate selection often provoke negative stereotypes regarding the participants. This paper focuses on age heterogamous unions or so-called May-December marriages, involving an older person and a young spouse. The public often attributes pecuniary (golddigger) motives to the latter. Our research tests the widespread notion that the younger spouse exchanges youth for status or money. Using data from the Panel on Income Dynamics (N=3609 couples) age homogamous and age heterogamous couples are compared in terms of each of the spouse's achieved and inherited status and the contribution these make to explained variance in income. Analysis using hierarchal multiple regression revealed that, contrary to popular belief, the status of the older spouse does not make a more important contribution toward explained income. Indeed, in this study, the reverse was the case in that the wife's status contributed more toward explained income. The notion that age heterogamy in marriage represents a channel of upward mobility for young women married to older men needs systematic reexamination.

On Gold Diggers:
Status Gain or Loss
in Age Heterogamous Marriages

In American society entry into marriage "is suppossed to depend upon love, which our culture defines as spontaneous (Modell, 1980:211)." Thus, the attribution of pecuniary motives to a spouse's entry into marriage, which in our society results in the application of the label of "gold digger," is a severe form of social dejection. Consider the results reported by Heise (1978) on a study on semantic diferentials for 1,250 words collected among 300 college students. In the evaluative scale ranging from -4 (bad, unhelpful, awful, sour) and +4 (good, helpful, nice, sweet) the average rating of gold digger was -.4, the identical rating obtained by ruffian, vagabond, kook, lifer, moron, scatterbrain, sexpot and sissy among othe words. In the activity scale ranging from -4 (slow, dead, quiet, stiff, old) to +4 (hurried, alive, noisy, fiery, young) gold digger's average rating was 2.0, close to fanatic which was rated 1.9, and athlete and maniac which were rated 2.3.

While the label of "gold digger" is not age or sex specific it is applied more often to women and to the younger spouse in marriages with unconventional age differences. This follows the view that women derive their

class position from their husbands (Wright, 1978; Blake, 1974), and the observation that "when status heterogamy occurs men tend to marry down and women tend to marry up -a phenomenon known as the mating gradient" (Burchinal, 1964). This pattern of women "marrying up," also refered to as "hypergamy," was taken for granted in the past (Centers, 1949; Hollingshead, 1950; Sundal and McCormick, 1951; Zelditch, 1964; Burchinal, 1964:654). However, lately it has been hard to confirm empirically (Glenn et al., 1974), found to be non existent (Tyree and Treas, 1974) or, at best, confined to specific segments of the population (Rubin, 1968).

The woman much younger than her husband, conventional wisdom has it, "is likely to be exploiting the man. She is thought to be 'after his money', his 'good name', or his life insurance." (Cuber, 1971:10). An early study on "The Age Factor in Marriage"(Bossard, 1933:547) asserts that "economic pressure is forcing a large proportion of girls to marry men much older than themselves, and that this is a common cause of divorce or other family maladjustment." More recently, Seidenberg (1972:9) assumes that age disparate unions "typically involve older men because women can attain economic and social security without years of struggle." This is why, in his view, the pattern of older men marrying younger women typically involves wealthy older men. We must note that age heterogamous marriages have in

fact been found to be more frequent among lower income strata and to be no more maladjusted than other couples (Vera, Berardo and Berardo, 1985).

As far as we know the status gain or loss in age heterogamous studies has not been empirically tested. In this paper we undertake such a task by comparing age homogamous and heterogamous couples in terms of how the family's current status is related to measures of each of the spouses inherited and achieved status.

The speculation concerning age heterogamous couples, of course, is not limited to the motives of the spouses, nor has it originated in this century. While an inventory of concerns with these couples is beyond the scope of this paper, it is useful to note in passing that Sophocles' tragedy Oedipus Rex, Shakespeare's Othello and Hamlet, Chaucer's "The Merchant's Tale" (the old spouse is January the Younger, May), Moliere's Le Tartuffe, Verdi's The Barber of Seville, and Navokov's Lolita are among a plethora of works of fiction that witness the interest that is awakened by these unions. To these one could add movies such as Harold and Maude, The Graduate, Lolita, Last Tango in Paris, Manhattan, and HBO's recent Finneggan Begin Again.

The interest in these couples could be seen as triggered by the couple's "multiple deviancy." First, these couples violate the rules of mate selection that prescribe a rather

narrow range of age differences in marriage. Second, as the expressions that someone has married someone "young enough to be his daughter...his son," or "old enough to be her father... his mother," denote, a disarrangement in the expected sequence of roles over the life cycle has taken place. These expressions also equate the couple's behavior to a violation of the incest taboo (Derensky and Landsburg 1981). In addition, in our society these couples upset established patterns of age segregation.

AGE HETEROGAMY IN MARRIAGE

The norms that impinge upon mate selection induce a rather small number of years between the ages of husband and wife in America. Family sociologists have conceived of these norms as being among those that define age homogamy in marriage, i.e., a part of "the widespread tendency for people to marry others who are like themselves in ways that are not subject to formal regulation (Leslie 1982:400). Strictly speaking, though, the norms that establish ideal ages for marriage and age differences among spouses are norms of heterogamy inasmuch they prescribe different ages for bride and groom.

The actual magnitude of the difference in age between spouses varies considerably both between and within societies. In Lybia, for example, brides were on the average 9 years younger than their husbands but only 1.9

years in Yugoslavia (Dixon, 1971). Almost invariably, though, across societies wives are younger than husbands (van den Berghe, 1973).

In the United States the difference in median age at first marriage is 2.4 years, down in steady decline from four years in 1900 (H.E.W., 1981; US.Bureau of the Census, 1974). However, when the husband was remarrying a first time bride the age difference between spouses was 6.2 years and .9 years when the wife was remarrying a first time groom. When both were remarrying, the median age difference was 3.7 years. (US. Bureau of the Census, 1972:Table 11). Race is another source of variation. The absolute difference among husbands and wives between the ages of twenty and 54 being 4.1 years for Whites and 5.5 years for Blacks. (Spanier and Glick 1980).

In this study we do not undertake the determination of what is a "May- September" or a "May- December" union. The definition of what constitutes such a union has yet to be empirically established. For our purposes it is enough to verify that some threshold, no matter how vague, has been used to apply a social label to some couples. This threshold implies a qualitative judgement that is a reflection of our age norms governing mate selection. In this study, therefore, we make do with an operational definition which clearly segregated at least one homogamous and two heterogamous groups with respect to the age

differences between the spouses. Thus, after considering the census figures just reported and to follow previous studies on the subject (Blood and Wolfe 1960; Vera, Berardo and Berardo 1983) we created four groups of couples according to their age differences. The following groups were formed for comparative purposes:

Group 1: Wives were four or more years older than their husbands.

Group 2: Husbands and wives were separated by no more than 3 years of age difference in either direction.

Group 3: Husbands were four to ten years older than their wives.

Group 4: Husbands were eleven or more years older than their wives.

The comparison which most interested us was that between Group 2 which we view as relatively age homogamous and groups 1 and 4 which we regard as age heterogamous. The asymmetry in cutting points for these age heterogamous groups of couples, four years for older wives, eleven for older husbands, also found in previous literature, takes into account the fact that age norms are applied differentially to men and women (Sontag, 1972). Thus, women are typically considered to be in an "age disparate union" when they are just a few years older than their husbands. Men need to be substantially older than their

wifes to be considered to be in an "age disparate union." We consider Group 3 to be ambiguous in terms of age homogamy.

THE RESEARCH QUESTION

The contention that younger spouses in age heterogamous unions are guided by desires to gain status, is, of course, extremely hard to test. However, one can measure the status which spouses have actually gained or lost in marriage. Commonly this has been done by comparing the spouses' father's occupation taken as an indicator of the stratum of origin and the husband's occupation taken as an indicator of the arrival stratum of both spouses (Centers, 1949; Rubin, 1968; Tyree and Treas, 1974). While the use of a spouse's father's occupation can be considered an appropriate indicator for the stratum of origin, the use of the husband's occupation as an indicator of arrival stratum is plagued with difficulties among which are the facts that marriage itself has an effect on the occupational careers of husbands and wives (Rubin, 1968) and that the wives occupation does have and effect on a family's social standing (Nock and Rossi, 1978).

Our conceptual starting point is that a family's social standing, as measured by that family's total income, is the result of the husband's and the wife's inherited and achieved status. We took the spouses father's occupation

as a measure of inherited status and their own education as an indicator of achieved status. Thus we compare the different contribution that the inherited and achieved status of each spouse makes to the explanation of the current level of income that a family enjoys, over and above the contribution made by the status of the other spouse. This comparisson should give us an idea of the magnitude of the status which could potentially be gained by the spouses in age heterogamous by contrast to the same potential gain in age homogamous marriages. To repeat ourselves, we are not studying the presence or absence of greedy motives at the time of marriage. Rather, we measure the magnitude of status to be gained by the spouses at later points in their marriages. We reason that if there was no status to be gained in the first place, or there was status to be lost, the conventional wisdom that younger spouses in age heterogamous couples are gold diggers should be put into question.

METHODS

The data for this study were drawn from the public use data tapes of the 1976 wave of the Panel of Income Dynamics. This wave contained information on both spouses. This panel has been found to be representative of the population of the United States in terms of income and age distributios which specially interest us here (ISR, 1976). Of the 5725 households in the survey we studied only those

of married couples that contained information on the ages of both spouses, a total of 3609 households.

The dependent variable is the total money income of the family (FAMOIN). It includes the combined income of all family members including salaries and wages, income from self employment, social security payments, public assistance, pensions, dividends, interests and all other income before taxes.

The independent variables are husbands' (HUBED) and wives' (WIFED) educational levels and fathers' occupational levels (HFAOCC, WFAOCC). Educational levels were measured on an eight point scale ranging from no schooling to advanced or professional degree. Occupational levels were measured using Duncan's Socioeconomic Index for occupational groups (Duncan 1961). The fathers' occupations were taken as measures of inherited status, and the spouses' education as an indicator of achieved status.

The research procedures were directed at identifying the comparative increment in variance explained of the family income through the incorporation of variables measuring the wives and the husbands' inherited and achieved status. We used hierarchical multiple regression and tested, within each age difference group, models in which the independent variables for husbands and wives were alternatively

introduced. Thus, the procedure measured for each block of variables, within each of the age groups, the unique contribution made by each spouse's status variables, having previously removed the variance explained by the statuses of the other. In each model we included the age of the older spouse (HUBAGE, WIFAGE) in first place, to control for, i.e.to remove the variance explained by, this variable before entering the rest of the variables in the model.

RESULTS

Tables 2 through 5 present, in separate analyses by age group, the regression of status variables on family income. We report here those models in which the status variables of the supposedly gold digging spouse (husband in Group I, wife in the other groups) are introduced first in the equation. Introducing the older spouse's status variable block last we measure the R2 increment brought about by the the consideration of the older spouses' status on top and above what has already been explained by the status of the younger spouse. Tables 2 through 4 contain the correlation coeficients, metric (B) and standardized coefficients (Beta) as well as the relative R2 increment are reported. Table 1 summarizes the results of the eight models tested reporting the R2 increments brought about

e introduction of the status variable block of each of each spouse.

TABLES 1 THROUGH 5 ABOUT HERE

The general finding is that contrary to popular belief, the status of the older spouse does not make a more important contribution to the explanation of the family income than does the status of the younger. In fact, surprisingly, it is the other way around. In Group 4 the existence of a "gold digger's syndrome" would have shown in a high contribution made by the husband's status to the explanation of family income. However, the younger wives' status contributes an increment in R2 explained of .099 on top and above the husband's status while the correlative increase in contribution of husbands' status is of only .035, or about one third of the variance explained in this group by the statuses of the wives. In Group I, of older wives, again the younger spouse's status contributes more to the explanation of family income than does the older wife's status. One must note that in the age homogamous group husband's status contributes more to the explanation (R^2=.042) than does the wife's (r^2=.025).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

What we present here is a first exploration of a complex problem the results of which must be qualified by several

caveats. First, one needs to keep in mind that women do not derive status in the same way that men do. The measures taken here, identical for men an women, have the advantage of objectivity, but the disasvantage of unknown comparability (Nielsen, 1978). Second, without attempting to resolve the question of comparability here, the meausures of status that we have used assume a continuous gradient of status and prestige, when in fact mate selection could well take place on the basis of perceived discrete classes of people. For example, expressions such as "marrying your own kind," "marrying a professional person," "marrying within our faith" point at qualitative, non linear differences between groups of people. Third, the sanctions for marrying outside one's class are different for men and women and vary greatly from one social class to the next (Hacker 1975), and this, no doubt, has an effect on mate selection.

These caveats notwithstanding, the results of the test performed here challege the conventional wisdom which attributes pecuniary (or status gain) motives to younger spouses in age heterogamous marriages. The notion that age heterogamy in marriage represents a channel of upward mobility for the younger spouse, especially for women, needs to be subjected to systematic reexamination.

REFERENCES

Blake, J.

1974 "The changing status of women in developing countries." Scientific American 231,3: 137-147.

Blood, R.O. and Wolfe, D.M.

1960 Husbands and Wives. New York: The Free Press.

Bossard, J.H.S.

1933 "The age factor in marriage: a Philadelphia study, 1931." American Journal of Sociology 38:536-547.

Burchinal, L.G.

1964 "The premarital dyad and love involvement." Pp. 623-674 in Harold T. Christensen (ed.), Handbook of Marriage and the Family. Chicago: Rand McNally.

Centers, R.

1949 "Marital selection and occupational strata." American Journal of Sociology 54:530-5

Cuber, J.F.

1971 "May-September marriages." Sexual Behavior I:9-17.

Derensky, A. and Landsburg, S.B.

1981 The Age Taboo: Younger Men- Older Women Relationships. Boston: Little, Brown.

Dixon, R.B.

1971 "Explaining cross-cultural variations in age at marriage and proportions never marrying." Population Studies 25(2): 215-233.

Duncan, O.D.

1961 "A socioeconomic index for all occupations." In Albert J. Reiss, Jr., Occupations and Social Status. New York: Free Press.

Glenn, N.D., Ross A.A., Tully, J.C.

1974 "Patterns of intergenerational mobility of females through marriage." American Sociological Review 39:683- 99.

Hacker E.M.

1975 "Class and race differentials in gender roles." In Lucile Duberman (ed.), Gender and Sex in Society. New York: Praeger.

Heise, D.R.

1979 Understanding Events. London: Cambridge University Press.

Hollingshead, A. B.

1950 "Cultural factors in the selection of marriage mates." American Sociological Review 15: 619-627.

Institute for Social Research

1976 A Panel of Income Dynamics: Procedures, Available Data 1968-1972, Interviewing Years. An Arbor, MI: University of Michigan.

Leslie, G.

1982 The Family in Social Context. New York:Oxford University Press.

Modell J.

1980 "Normative Aspects of American Marriage Timing Since

World War II." Journal of Family History 5: 210- 234.

Nielsen, J.

1978 Sex in Society: Perspectives on Stratification. Belmont, CA:Wadsworth.

Nock, S. and Rossi, P.

1978 "Ascription versus achievement in the attribution of family status." American Journal of Sociology 84: 565-590.

Rubin, Z.

1968 "Do american women marry up?" American Sociological Review 33: 750- 756.

Seidenberg, R.

1972 "Older women and younger men." Sexual Behavior (April): 9-17.

Sontag, S.

1972 "The double standard of aging." Saturday Review." Saturday Review, September 23.

Spanier, G.R. and Glick, P.C.

1980 Mate Selection Differentials Between Blacks and Whites in the United States." Social Forces, 58: 707-725.

Sundal A., and McCormick, Thomas C.

1951 "Age at marriage and mate selection." American Sociological Review 16:37-48.

Tyree, A. and Treas, J.

1974 "The occupational and marital mobility of women." American Sociological Review 39: 293-302

U.S. Bureau of the Census

1972 "Marital status." Census of the Population 1970. Final Report, PC (2)-4C. Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office,

1974 "Marital status amd living arrangements: March, 1974." Current Population Reports, Series P-20, No. 271. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office.

U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare

1981 Advance Report of Final Marriage Statistics, 1979. Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office.

van den Berghe, P.L.

1973 Age and Sex in Human Societies: A Biosocial Perspective. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

Vera, H., Berardo, F., and Berardo, D.

1985 "Age Heterogamy in Marriage." Journal of Marriage and the Family, August, 553- 566.

Wright, E.O.

1978 Class, Crisis and the State. London: New Left Books.

Zeldritch, M.

1964 "Family, marriage and kinship." Pp. 680-733 in Robert E.L. Faris (ed.), Handbook of Modern Sociology. Chicago: Rand McNally.

TABLE 1. SUMMARY OF INCREMENTAL R^2
Hierarchical Multiple Regressions of Husbands and Wives Status Variable on Family Income by Age Difference Groups

GROUP	VARIABLE BLOCK	INCREMENTAL R^2
I	Husbands' Status	.078 **
Older Wives	Wifes' Status	.055 **
II	Husbands' Status	.042 ***
Homogenous Marriage	Wifes' Status	.025 ***
III	Husbands' Status	.030 ***
Older Husbands	Wifes' Status	.056 ***
IV	Husbands' Status	.035 **
11 years +	Wifes' Status	.099 ***

** $p < .01$

*** $p < .001$

TABLE 2. Hierarchical Multiple Regressions of Husbands and Wives Status Variable on Family Income by Age Difference Groups

Group I. Older Wives four or more years.
Correlations, Coefficients, Means, Standard Deviations, Metric Estimates, Standardized Estimates and Incremental R^2

VARIABLES	FAMOIN (DV)	WIFAGE	HFAOCC	HUBED	WFAOCC	WIFED	B	BETA	sr^2 Incremental
WIFAGE	-.084						40.864	.058	
HFAOCC	.253	-.174					321.241	.059	
HUBED	.529	-.190	.343				1797.968	.337	
WFAOCC	.291	-.175	.368	.398			116.446	.024	
WIFED	.505	-.224	.272	.597	.420		1625.152	.291	.055**
							Intercept = -2019.585		
Means	15,122.18	49.04	2.95	4.07	2.96	4.02			
S.D.'s	9,867.36	14.44	1.83	1.85	2.00	1.77			
							R^2 = .342		
							Adj R^2 = .313		
							R = .585 ***		

** p < .05

*** p < .001

TABLE 3. Hierarchical Multiple Regressions of Husbands and Wives Status Variable on Family Income by Age Difference Groups

Group II. Spouses with no more than three years of age difference
Correlations, Coefficients, Means, Standard Deviations, Metric Estimates, Standardized Estimates and Incremental R^2

VARIABLES	FAMOIN (DV)	WIFAGE	WFAOCC	WIFED	HFAOCC	HUBED	B	BETA	sr^2 Incremental
WIFAGE	.162						218.034	.275	
WFAOCC	.192	-.141					610.745	.111	
WIFED	.327	-.213	.375				1077.040	.146	
HFAOCC	.192	-.140	.357	.328			158.282	.029	
HUBED	.365	-.226	.364	.682	.411		1751.585	.275	.042***
						Intercept =	-6848.619		
Means	16,559.33	36.45	3.45	4.43	3.41	4.59			
S.D.'s	11,325.17	14.31	2.06	1.54	2.10	1.78			
							R^2 = .225		
							Adj R^2 = .223		
							R = .473	***	

*** p < .001

TABLE 4. Hierarchical Multiple Regressions of Husbands and Wives Status Variable on Family Income by Age Difference Groups

Group III. Husband older by 4 to 10 years.
Correlations, Coefficients, Means, Standard Deviations, Metric Estimates, Standardized Estimates and Incremental R^2

VARIABLES	FAMOIN (DV)	HUBAGE	WFAOCC	WIFED	HFAOCC	HUBED	B	BETA	sr^2 Incremental
HUBAGE	.021						105.154	.140	
WFAOCC	.310	-.081					503.065	.101	
WIFED	.434	-.172	.430				1953.320	.261	
HFAOCC	.310	-.132	.422	.369			406.572	.073	
HUBED	.404	-.242	.459	.642	.458		1179.035	.197	.030***
						Intercept	= -3990.16		
Means	15,960.71	39.37	3.06	3.81	2.93	4.02			
S.D.'s	11,050.12	14.22	1.90	1.48	1.99	1.84			
							R^2 = .250		
							Adj R^2 = .245		
							R = .495 ***		

*** $p < .001$

TABLE 5. Hierarchical Multiple Regressions of Husbands and Wives Status Variable on Family Income by Age Difference Groups

Group IV. Husband 11 or more years older.
Correlations, Coefficients, Means, Standard Deviations, Metric Estimates, Standardized Estimates and Incremental R^2

VARIABLES	FAMOIN (DV)	HUBAGE	WFAOCC	WIFED	HFAOCC	HUBED	B	BETA	sr^2 Incremental
HUBAGE	-.136						.331	.000	
WFAOCC	.230	-.110					-103.323	.017	
WIFED	.542	-.209	.409				2804.933	.406	
HFAOCC	.205	-.054	.266	.211			290.226	.050	
HUBED	.478	-.231	.313	.611	.339		1201.624	.218	.035**
					Intercept		= - 996.891		
Means	13,936.91	55.70	2.86	3.65	2.54	3.50			
S.D.'s	11,176.10	13.15	1.89	1.61	1.90	2.04			
							R^2 = .331		
							Adj R^2 = .314		
							R = .575 ***		

** $p < .01$

*** $p < .001$